

LONG AGO AT LIBERTY HILL

Long Ago at Liberty Hill—An Historic Sketch, has just been published. The book is interesting reading even for those who have never been to Liberty Hill—or heard of it. The location is in the northern part of Kershaw County about 20 miles north of Camden and not far from the Lancaster County line.

In the early 1800s, Liberty Hill was distinctly rural with fine old plantation homes scattered over the countryside. Later there was a small cluster of stores, a post office, a Grange hall, a Presbyterian church and a school—enough enterprises to label Liberty Hill as a village.

The village of Liberty Hill, dating back at least to 1813, was placed on the National Register of Historical Places in 1978. Twenty-five mid-19th century and early 20th century buildings, including the Liberty Hill Presbyterian Church, at the same time, were designated as Liberty Hill Historic District. In 1993, the Liberty Hill post-office celebrated its 175th anniversary.

Liberty Hill has a rich past and has produced a number of leaders out of proportion to its size. In the 1850s it was one of the wealthiest communities in S. C. and sought out for its absence of mosquitoes.

Sherman's troops arrived on February 22, and left March 2nd. They burned the grist mill, the 2-story academy, 2 stores filled with cotton, a tannery and various homes, barns and stables. All of the homes had been occupied by troops and those not burned were left in shambles.

At the James S. Thompson home, "Men ran through the house, cursing and shouting. They took many of the dresses of the women, presumably to send them home, and they cut those they didn't want into shreds with their swords. They destroyed the furniture and slashed the family portraits. . . ."

Another memoir read, "When the army left . . . our families had for days literally nothing upon which to subsist except such corn and fragments of meat as they could gather up from the Federal camps. There was scarcely a horse, mule, cow, hog or chicken left in the whole congregation. There was but one lone rooster left to crow for day on Liberty Hill and he seemed to be astonished that he was left."

Fortunately for the people of Liberty Hill (and others in the S. C. Piedmont), "Wherever the face of the ground was even slightly scratched and seed of corn or cotton were deposited an abundant harvest followed."

In more recent times Liberty Hill has been known as the home of James P. Richards, Fifth District Congressman for 11 terms and appointed by President Eisenhower as U. S. delegate to United Nations. His uncle, John G. Richards was governor of SC in the 1920s.

The author of the book, Mary Ellen Cunningham, born in Rock Hill in 1915, not only tells an interesting tale, she is an interesting story within herself.

Mary Ellen's family moved back to Liberty Hill in 1917 to their father's homeplace. She graduated from Winthrop College shortly before World War II. She tried to join the WAVE's and the WAC's (two branches of women's services)

but failed because of a history of secondary anemia. During the war she worked at the Liberty Hill fire tower for about 18 months.

Then in 1946 Miss Cunningham went to work for the FBI in Washington, D.C. She retired in 1976 and kept her Washington apartment but she has a permanent home in Liberty Hill. Her family's original large plantation home had been burned by Sherman's army during the Civil War, The Cunningham family moved into what had been the cook's house and the carriage driver's house. Her father combined the two homes into a 7-room one in 1926.

The Cunningham family home was rented when Mary Ellen returned to make Liberty Hill her permanent home, so in 1980 she had the two-story smokehouse, located in the back yard, converted into comfortable living quarters. It was here that her book, *Long Ago at Liberty Hill* came into being.